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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 005967

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR PRESSES FOREIGN MINISTER ON BURMA

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Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce, reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During his farewell call on Foreign Minister Nitya Pibulsonggram, the Ambassador pressed the issue of Burma from several angles, but received the same watered down responses the RTG has been delivering for the past two months. Nitya believed that Thailand and ASEAN had no choice but to engage Burma, as sanctions alone would not bring about change and there existed no possibility that Burma would be expelled from ASEAN. Nitya also said the MFA had been "overridden" in interagency discussion of Thailand's national petroleum authority's proposed sizeable gas deal with Burma, and that the Ministry of Energy actively tried to keep the MFA out of the debate. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On November 28, the Ambassador paid a farewell call on Foreign Minister Nitya Pibulsonggram. Burma featured prominently during the discussion, and the Ambassador used the opportunity to encourage the Thais to continue efforts to encourage political reform in Burma. He stressed to the FM that Thailand risked appearing to the international community as an apologist for the Burmese junta if the RTG did not take a stronger position towards the Than Shwe regime. Nitya indicated in a resigned tone that Thailand may already bear

that label.

PETROLEUM DEAL OVER-RIDE

13. (C) Regarding the Petroleum Authority of Thailand's (PTT) recent announcement that it was considering negotiating with a member of the China National Oil group to jointly develop a petroleum field in Burma, the Ambassador stressed that the timing of this decision was unfortunate, as it reflected poorly on Thailand. Nitya explained defensively that the decision had been forced through the bureaucratic system without much debate. According to Nitya, the Ministry of Energy was so intent on moving forward with the deal that the MFA had been shut out of internal RTG discussions. "We were overridden," he lamented.

ENGAGEMENT ONLY WAY FORWARD WITH BURMA

14. (C) At the end of the day, ASEAN and Thailand were left with no other option but to engage the Burmese junta, according to Nitya. He said that if the Thai critics of the RTG's current policy were to see the pressures from various sectors to which he was exposed, even the ardent advocates of a stronger line toward Burma would end up adopting the position of the current government. He further noted that ASEAN possessed no mechanism to expel Burma, and even if it did, Nitya believed that Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia would block such a maneuver. Moreover, even if ASEAN expulsion were possible, it would only push Burma towards China, which would "make things even worse," Nitya stated.

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15. (C) Nitya emphasized that during the entire process of the ASEAN Charter's drafting, Thailand had worked hard to incorporate a majority vote formula that would enable the organization to take a stand on human rights issues such as those calling world attention to Burma. "People do not think we pushed for this capability, but we did," he commented. However, the final consensus model adopted ensured that no member country will ever be investigated by ASEAN.

16. (C) Sanctions were not viable because on their own they have little affect in terms of influencing the Burmese junta to take corrective measures, Nitya asserted. If the UN Security Council voted to impose sanctions on Burma, Nitya said that Thailand would respect the decision. However, he explained that in practice there was no way to seal up Burma's long land border with Thailand, and people would find a way to circumvent sanctions, rendering them ineffective. Nitya stated that he had discussed the issue of sanctions with numerous European officials, who he alleged all agreed with his premise that sanctions on their own could not bring about change in Burma. He even cited French Foreign Minister Kouchner's public remarks during his trip to Thailand that, while France supported sanctions for symbolic reasons, they were not effective. He concluded by describing Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi as more conciliatory than she had been in the past, suggesting that her current position may offer a window of opportunity for dialogue with the Burmese authorities.

COMMENT

17. (C) Nitya approached the issue of Burma with his typical despondent outlook. He gave no sign that the RTG would consider new options for responding to the Burmese junta, even in terms of new forms of "constructive engagement." At least so long as the interim administration remains in office -- a few more months at most -- Thailand appears unlikely to

take any role in pressing ASEAN to become more active in advocating democratic reforms in Burma. We will continue to push the USG point of view with the RTG.

BOYCE